

BLACK AND TAN FANTASY

AUTHOR'S NOTES

THE TITLE

“Black and Tan Fantasy” is the title of a musical piece written by Duke Ellington and Bubber Miley in 1927, named for the after-hour clubs habituated by jazz musicians and their fans. These were integrated places, not considered respectable. The piece itself is composed of two contrasting melodic lines: the first Black, bluesy and somber, and the second a “sweet” example of White popular song. But, as the scholar David Metzger notes, the first melody is derived from a “spiritual” Miley’s mother sang to him as a child, based on a well-known hymn written by a White man. And the second, “sweet” melody is original to Ellington. Thus, the music’s origins undermine notions of Black and White as distinct and immutable categories.

Then the solos start. According to Metzger, the cornet and trombone solos “elicited considerable commentary” by White critics troubled and “spellbound” by the solos’ “distortion” (the growling and smeared notes and the vocalized tone) of the “purity” of the “white” source material. As a poet might put it, the music was “changed utterly,” and “[a] terrible beauty [was] born.” If you haven’t heard it, give it a listen.

THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”) was born in 1960 out of local sit-in movements that attracted Black college students from throughout the American South. SNCC members became the “shock troops of the revolution” when they began working in rural communities that other movement organizations thought were too dangerous for public protest. SNCC’s staff workers sought to work with and develop local leaders to build lasting African-American grass-root organizations.

SNCC came to the Mississippi Delta in the summer of 1962 to register Blacks to vote, and never really left. The local activism spurred by SNCC has endured in the political activities of Delta Blacks to this very day. During the summer months of 1964 over 1,000 college students, mostly White and mostly from outside the South, joined with SNCC and other civil rights organizations for Mississippi's heroic "Freedom Summer," which captured the attention of our country's media. Those months are perhaps the most remembered episode, by the country at large, of SNCC's work in Mississippi. But the timeline for this book's narrative focuses on the fall of 1962 through the summer of 1963—before the college students came.

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,

Langston Hughes, *Let America Be America Again*

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here is the wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

ISAAC MENDELSSOHN

THE HANGED MAN

SUMMER, 1963

“Killed by the Klan.” Those four words: they were the headline of every newspaper and the lead story on the six o’clock news. Isaac Mendelssohn’s father came down from New York City to Mississippi. He clutched his son’s casket and wept. He bore the body home by train and, even though he was white (or perhaps, because he was Jewish) he insisted on riding in the car for Negroes. To every question asked he gave the same reply: “Killed by the Klan. My son was killed by the Klan.” He released the morgue shot to the press: the three K’s carved in his dead son’s chest. It became iconic.

HARRY WILBOURNE

THE DROWNED MAN

A SMALL TOWN IN ALABAMA: 1923

Negro streets are crazy. The whites who built each new block and neighborhood took no care in how the streets were laid. The intersections weren't always aligned, so you have to dog-leg it to the right or left to find your way through. And there're gaps between address numbers, and the odds and evens switch from side to side. You have to be on your toes. But this time, you could just head for the glow. And Harry Wilbourne knew this neighborhood; he wouldn't get lost. He hoped Charlotte, sitting beside him, wouldn't notice. He had no business knowing these streets the way he did.

His son and daughter were in the back seat, their heads out of the windows like hounds, craning to see ahead, each wanting to be the first to see it. When a house goes up in the colored part of town, everybody comes to watch it burn: all the whites and Negroes, the rich and poor alike. And houses burn every winter. They're shacks. Their wood is dry and bare, and when a fireplace is unattended, even for a second, all it takes is a gust through a gap between the weathered, shrunken boards: a spark flicks out, it catches a rug or a rag—the air cracks and whoosh!—the flames crawl and tumble, they jump and dance and thread their way up table legs and walls, and the wooden shutters bulge and crack and burst. At night, you can see the glow all

the way over on the white side of town. Or you can hear the siren. Either way, you're in your car and there.

Harry's children scrambled out and looked for playmates—neighbors and cousins tumbled from their cars. They shouted and ran, in waves, to and fro like on a playground. Charlotte waited for him to open her door and they stood across the street with the other whites, watching the house spitting wood and bits of tar paper, the firelight yellow and pumpkin-orange. The Negroes stood far off to either side, ceding this, their street, to the whites, huddling for warmth in their threadbare clothes. The firemen turned their hoses to the houses on either side. Was the burning one beyond saving?

Harry saw which house it was. He furtively scanned the Negroes on either side. They were huddled too close together, he couldn't tell them apart. If she was there, or one of her children, he couldn't see them.

Away from the fire, it was dark. Harry squinted. His eyes stung from the smoke. Ash whirled like snow. But he was staring now, the fire almost forgotten; he was trying just to find her, to see her. He no longer even cared what Charlotte must be thinking, him staring so openly at the Negroes.

He stepped from the grassy curb to the dirt street, and stumbled over the frozen mud, walking close to one group of Negroes and then to the other. It was noisy from the gushing water; the white adults and children shouting and laughing; the fire devouring the wood and tar; so maybe he shouted her name—he wasn't even aware if he did; he couldn't see her!—and there was no response. She must still be inside. He paused at that thought, shivering.

He turned and stared at the fire, the house a hideous bulk, black within the malignant flames, and the gray smoke wreathed and writhing, up and fading into the night. He felt a hand at

his sleeve. Did Charlotte speak his name? He started walking, then loping, over to the fire truck. He grabbed a canvas tarp. He looked for the closest man with a hose. Harry stepped in front of him and held up the tarp until it was soaked with water, and then he ran into the house—the front room was incredibly small—folding the stiff tarp about him and over his head, inhaling the smoke, dry and sour, and feeling the heat from the floor boards up through his shoes and into the soles of his feet. The smoke billowed and flowed. It leaked through the floor-boards and out of the walls and windows. Harry stepped quickly across the room and reached for a door knob, but caught himself in the nick of time, and instead drove his tarp-covered shoulder into the door and broke through, and stepped over the bottom of the door that was still in its frame, and in the smoke and soot and heat they were there. Geneva was crouching on the floor, reaching up one hand to the shuttered window, the other attending to her children. They were face down on the floor, stiff as planks, and resistant to his touch. Geneva had to lift them to their feet. Harry grouped the three of them close together and put the tarp around them. He held its sides—it bulged behind them like a sail—and, walking backward, guided them to the sudden night air, all of them stumbling the last few steps and gulping smoke and coughing.

Her children started to cry. Harry sat down in front of the burning house and Geneva fell towards him and embraced him, and he saw the far stars smudged by the smoke. His skin felt gritty. He looked at his hands. They were covered in soot. He brushed it from his sleeves—it smeared. He could feel it prickle in his nostrils; his eyes stung; and then he felt it on her hand caressing his face. He took his handkerchief from his breast pocket and tried to clean himself and to clean her hands, but it too was covered in soot.

He remembered where he was, surrounded by neighbors and family—cousins, nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles, his parents, his in-laws, and his wife and his children. And he could hear their cursing and cat-calls and boos. “Nigger lover!” “Go away!” “Don’t come back!”

The ground below him felt sharp and cold, it hurt, and he shivered and almost passed out. He realized he no longer belonged—suddenly bereft of all his family and friends, and of his store and possessions too. Geneva was standing now, her children clutching her legs and waist, and she reached down to help him stand. She looked around. He didn’t know if she was looking at the Negroes or the whites. Then she looked at him, close, and made him look at her. She had never done that before.

“Come on baby, let’s go.” She spoke so softly, he could barely hear her voice.

The tarp was on the ground, forgotten. He put his arm around her waist and his other, only slightly hesitating, around her two children, like his, an older boy and a younger girl. In his confusion, he couldn’t recall their names. The whites in the crowd began to throw stones, chunks of ice, and clumps of frozen mud. A stone hit Harry on his arm, and he drew the children closer to his body. When a rock struck Geneva, he looked at the crowd, furious, trying to find who threw it. “Stop that! Not her. Not her!” He began to walk, cautiously, holding Geneva and her children close, and somehow walked them through the crowd. “My car,” he told them. “We’ll be safe in my car.”

The cursing grew louder; it was a burning, burning, burning, in his ears and in his head. Angry faces were all around him—surging, ebbing—as he pushed through them to his car. He had known them all his life. Now he couldn’t place a single one. He didn’t care to; he didn’t even try. They were a nuisance, they weren’t even real, shouting curses and shoving, but parting as he passed. Then he saw Charlotte, almost hidden in that unreal crowd. Their eyes caught. He

tried to read hers, but she turned away, sharply, and then she disappeared. Harry stared at the space where she had been, and, with a start, he realized their children must be with her. He hadn't seen them. He stood where he was, he couldn't move. He felt a hand at his sleeve. This time it was Geneva. She was pointing to his car.

He opened a door and Geneva ushered her children in. They moved stiffly, slowly; he had them sit. They stared at the inside of the car and ran their hands along the leather seats. Wide-eyed, neither of them spoke. They looked ready to cry. Geneva slid into Charlotte's seat. Harry started the engine and looked at her, goggle-eyed. A few more rocks, and then the white crowd surrounded his car.

They were pushing at it; rocking it, and those in front heaved chunks of ice and frozen mud at the windshield. Harry put the car in gear and started slowly, the car still rocking. He honked his horn and gunned his engine; the car jumped and the people backed away. He nudged their way through the crowd and still people laid their hands on the car; it slid and then stayed steady. Harry slowly took up speed. Then he was past the frozen, muddy street, and on a concrete road that looked like dirty, hard-packed snow, and laced with tar-filled cracks. He looked at Geneva, his face a question, and she told him, "Turn west. My people live in Chattanooga." Harry drove as fast as he could. He didn't dare stop on the way. At the city limits, Geneva would tell him where to go.